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SUBJECT: GENDER EQUALITY IN TURKISH POLITICS: IS PARITY  
PLAUSIBLE?

¶1. (U) At a joint Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation-ARI Movement conference entitled 'Young Women Fit For Politics', Turkish and Swedish MP's discussed women's role in policy-making. The Hjalmarson Foundation -- a democracy-development foundation tied to the Moderate party of Sweden -- and the ARI Movement -- an independent organization promoting youth-oriented, participatory solutions -- provided a forum to discuss the role women play in politics today, and the ways in which that role might be expanded in the future. While the Swedish MP's had little to offer beyond a mandatory quota system, the Turkish MPs had more nuanced and realistic assessments/approaches.

¶2. (SBU) Cem Toker, chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), argued that gender parity in a vacuum is nonsense. He said each party has to run the best candidate it can with a finite source of funding; if that candidate is a woman so be it, but you can not force a party to run non-viable candidates. In theory gender equality is a great thing, but in Turkey the reality is something different, he argued. The average Turkish citizen has a 4th grade education, the average Turkish woman lower still. Add to that the lack of real support, even within the feminist community, for female candidates, he said. The LDP joined KADER -- Turkey's largest women's organization -- in a series of workshops designed to teach women in the South East about political participation. At the end of the workshop, however, KADER could not recommend a single woman that they would be willing to back in a local election, he claimed.

¶3. (SBU) Canan Kalsin, Justice and Development Party (AKP) MP, said that she was proud of the progress that her party has made; out of the 50 women in parliament, 30 are AKP MPs. That said, once she deviated from the 'all is well with AKP' party-line she recognized that there were fissures in party leadership, at least at her level, with regard to female candidates. Women, she said, when allowed to participate in politics are cubby-holed into 'women's issues', as she was when she first joined AKP. "Only after making a noise" was she promoted to her current position, Associate Provisional Director of External Affairs. Kalsin ended by saying that while progress has been made, meaningful participation by women in Turkish politics remains a challenge.

¶4. (SBU) A similar debate has been taking place in op-ed columns in the Turkish Press. Progressive columnists argue that by banning headscarves at universities, women suffer double discrimination: once at the hands of paternal Islam, and again by the patriarchal guarantors of secularism. Both of which, they note, disproportionately affect women. Devout Muslim men are neither required to wear particular religious garb, nor are they required to disrobe in any way before entering public buildings.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: None of the 30 AKP female MPs wears an Islamic headscarf, the wearing of which is banned on the floor of parliament by by-laws dictating an MP dress-code. However, the wives of most AKP elected officials and senior bureaucrats do cover their heads, and a "covered wife" is widely viewed as a career asset if not a political litmus test. When asked whether Kalsin's choice to not cover her head affected her ability to rise within the party, she answered "no", albeit after a prolonged pause. END COMMENT

WIENER